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Birthday Hunting

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Birthday Hunting

Carolyn Ries

Rose slips out from under the floral comforter, careful not to wake her sleeping husband. She walks across the hall into the girls' room and wakes her daughters, Valérie and Maria. Dance starts at 9, and Valerie always throws a fit if they're late, which isn't often. Rose smiles, Valerie gets that promptness from her. Maria picks out her own clothes, a dress like usual. This one at least has long sleeves and is somewhat appropriate for the chilly October morning. At the studio as Valerie clogs with all her 6th grade friends on the other side of the glass window, 4-year-old Maria occupies herself by looking at all the places to eat in *Green Eggs and Ham*. She sits by Rose's feet.

Usually Rose ran errands during this time, but there is nothing she needs to get today, so instead, she zones out, watching her daughter stand on one leg, swinging the other back and fourth, with her hands on her hips. She mentally plans out the day. Go home, get the boys and head to Uncle Marvin's for the family hayride. The kids might even wear their Halloween costumes.

When she gets home, Rose realizes Wayne and her son Nick have gone out to the fields behind their house to do some grouse hunting. The note promises, "Be back by 11:00."

Rose has always been the punctual one, remembering the details that make a family function. Things like dinner, doctor appointments and bedtimes. Wayne keeps to the schedule unless he's hunting, fishing, or doing anything outdoors. Due to this, Rose calculates the boys will actually make it back by quarter to noon.

She puts a cake into the oven. Chocolate, Nick's favorite. He just turned 12 yesterday and is looking forward to celebrating at Uncle Marvin's.

Valerie runs upstairs to change out of her leggings and t-shirt, and Maria waddles after her, holding her open book to "I will not eat them in a box, I will not eat them with a fox." Rose sets the timer and follows the girls, getting together sweatshirts and hats for that afternoon. After grabbing Valerie's favorite purple one, she decides the closet is much too disorganized and needs to be cleaned out. She's just getting into the third shelf, an odd combination of sweaters and nail polish. The nail polish gets thrown into its correct plastic container, while the sweaters are refolded

and either put back or thrown on the ground. The "donate" pile on the floor grows huge as only three turtlenecks return to their original home. The doorbell rings, followed by pounding. *Good*, Rose thinks as she folds and boxes up the sweaters on the floor before starting to walk down the stairs, *they must actually be coming in already and locked themselves out.*

She checks the clock on the way down the steps - 10:36 - still lots of time to organize and get to Uncle Marvin's. Then she notices Dennis from next door, pounding harder on the glass. Her eyes travel lower and focus on Nick's bright orange hunting jacket. It is covered in what looks like blood. Only then does she pick up her pace and fling open the door.

"I killed Dad." Nick looks at her, his hands hanging limp at his sides, his face in a sort of mysterious calm. Dennis' hand is on Nick's shoulder, supporting Nick's thin frame, keeping him up.

Rose shakes her head. "No you didn't." She moves her head back and fourth again, quickly. She ignores the fact that more of Nick's jacket is red than orange, that he smells like iron, that Dennis is standing here instead of Wayne, and Nick is unable to stand on his own. Dennis nods, his hand clamped tight yet, so that they both move up and down with the motion of his head. He explains he heard a shot while tilling up the field around the Sumac Grove, Nick and Wayne were hunting in. He stopped the tractor mid-row and ran over to find Nick kneeling over Wayne. His small hands on Wayne's neck trying to stop the bleeding.

Dennis continues, choosing his words so as not to say anything too startling. He watches Rose's reaction, waits for the moment for it all to sink in.

It doesn't.

"There's no way." Rose is still inside the house, while Nick and Dennis stand on the front step. Her arm holds the door open between them. It's the kind of gesture you have when there's someone at the door trying to sell you something you don't need and you want them to go away. Her gaze is on Nick. Her firstborn. Nicholas. Then Dennis. The guy next door. Who gives them sweet corn in the summer.

Valerie wanders out of her room. She stands on the landing, about to come check out what's happening, what has already happened. She sees Nick. The red stains on the orange. Her mother's protests. Screaming, Val runs back to her room. Even after slamming the door, her screams echo throughout the house. Maria continues looking at books in her room. Her fingers trace pretty pictures of princesses and happy endings.

"I'm going to go save him." Rose starts calling the neighbors, her fingers pressing the buttons too hard and hitting all the wrong numbers.

She hangs up, then tries again, the phone rings and rings. Each ring feels like forever and when there's no answer, she moves on to the next person. Another call and Sandy picks up, Rose ignores the "how are you?" and asks for someone to come over and stay with the kids *right now*. Sandy'll be right over. Rose says thank you and hangs up, staring at the receiver. Dennis leaves to go wait for the ambulance to direct them to where the body is. He helps Nick take off the splattered jacket before guiding him to the end of the driveway where they'll sit together.

After hanging up the phone Rose becomes a different woman. She paces around the kitchen, looking out the deck door into the backyard trying to see the field where it happened. She tries not to focus on the wait and how each minute feels like hours. Rose walks back upstairs, looks at the half empty shelf with everything on the carpet and picks one sweater up, placing it next to the others. She takes it back off, puts it on the floor again, and wanders away. The doorbell rings. This time she opens it before the second chime, gives another word of thanks to Sandy and sprints to the Grove. She turns around just after a few feet, "There's a cake in the oven!" And then with no idea where she is going, she runs.

Two other neighbors, Mike and Andrew notice the frantic way she is running to the field and realizing something's wrong, hop on their four wheelers and race out to the woman practically flying through the grass. Rose jumps on behind Mike, and together they drive all over the field, searching for a man lying in the grass, holding onto the impossible chance that he can be saved. Joe notices a body nearly twenty feet away, and so does Rose. She leaps off, bolts towards her husband, but is pulled back.

Her arms flail and every ounce of energy she has ever had is put towards getting out of this man's grasp and to Wayne's side. Kicks and punches get her nowhere as the men have to use all their strength to hold this 115 lb woman back from the only thing she wants in life at that moment. Wayne. She needs to save him. As Mike engulfs her in a bear hug, he imagines if it were his wife in this situation, and holds Rose tighter, whispering they'll get through this.

Sirens blare. An ambulance and police car show up at the scene. Nick and Dennis arrive with them, and Nick is ushered to the back of the squad car to be interviewed. Mike walks Rose over to them, and it finally hits her, like a punch in the stomach when she notices the paramedics move slowly and carefully. They don't shout out instructions and the excitement of possibility and hope isn't there. Rose knows Wayne is dead.

As they lower their aching bodies into the back seat of the cruiser, Nick turns to his mother, "Do we have to sell the house now? Will I still

get to go to Australia?"

The sheriff watches them from the front seat, through the partition bars. He offers a half smile and condolences before saying, "Tell me what happened."

Without the huge jacket on, Nick looks like the little boy he is. A kid, just entering the 7th grade, who shouldn't be in the back of a stuffy sheriff's car. He hardly blinks and doesn't move any more than necessary. His hands are useless in his lap, like aliens to his body. Nick starts at the beginning. Poised, like he's already gone over every detail in his head, waiting for the part where he wakes up from this nightmare.

"We went grouse hunting," he begins, and Rose hears for the first time what events led up to this.

For Nick's birthday yesterday, Wayne took him to a gun shop to pick out his own gun. Nick found one quickly, but they were unable to bring it home because a background check had to be completed on Wayne before he could purchase it. No big deal they thought, after the check was completed, Wayne would go pick it up later. That morning, the day seemed perfect for hunting, and because Nick recently completed a gun safety course, they decided to go. The fact that Nick didn't have his own gun yet didn't stop them. He just borrowed one of his dad's, which happened to be too heavy and awkward for the skinny 12-year old to handle. They didn't see any birds until they decided to give up and head home.

Nick was crossing over a hill, and his dad was a little ways behind him, just at the bottom of it. The sky was clear, and a lone grouse flew up directly in front of Nick. It flew over his head, behind him, getting farther and farther away. The farther it got, his odds of hitting it also diminished. This made him hurry. Wayne saw the bird too, and said something along the lines of, "I'll get this one." But Nick, wanting to be the hero, wanted the opportunity.

Nick swung around to face the bird. The 30 inch barrel was nearly half the length of him and his left arm shook under the weight of it. His right elbow drew straight back, finger on the trigger. Remember to lead, he thought, aiming a little ways in front of the grouse. He fired a single shot. The bird flew away. His dad fell to the ground.

Nick ran to Wayne's side, dropping the weapon and falling to his knees. "Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad, Dad!" He applied pressure to his Dad's neck, where the wound was, as Nick's jacket soaked up the blood like a sponge.

It was everywhere. A pool surrounding them. Nick, careful not to move the body, kept trying to find a pulse and stop the bleeding. It didn't help though, the 20-gauge double-barrel shotgun had hit the carotid artery.

Dennis, who had been working the field surrounding the Sumac Grove realized something wasn't right, when he heard "Dad! Dad! Dad!" and hurried over to see what was wrong. Just by looking at the body, he could tell Wayne was already gone. Then he led Nick back to the house to tell Rose.

Time sits still in the squad car as Nick and Rose are frozen, they held each other's hand throughout the interrogation. Rose's thumb strokes the back of Nick's hand the entire 20 minutes that seems like eternity. The sheriff clears his throat from the front seat, pausing in his frantic scribbling. Outside, paramedics wrap up the body, packing Wayne away. Rose and Nick are stuck inside the car, inside their heads. Their imaginations play out the events of the day with every other possible outcome except for this.